

Idaho foundation provides support to wildland fighters

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Burk Minor, the executive director and co-founder of the Boise-based Wildland Firefighter Foundation, isn't much to talking about himself.

He'll make public appearances on occasion, but the accolades – and there are plenty of those -- come from others who have worked with him. Eric Brocksome, who heads the foundation's wellness program, offers insights about Minor.

"He is the heartbeat of the wildland community," Brocksome says. "None of this would happen without his vision, kindness and awareness of the community. He has been the primary fundraiser and a quiet presence for the entirety of the foundation's existence. No one can duplicate his energy, love and understanding of what the needs are in the wildland community. He is often the first call from the federal government and contractors when there is an incident. They all have his cell phone number."

There's nothing lightweight about what the foundation does. It is, as Minor describes on the foundation's website, a resource for comfort and stability for firefighters injured or killed in the line of duty.

"For nearly 30 years, we've had the honor of standing with wildland firefighters and their families through some of the hardest days of their lives," Minor says. "We've sat in living rooms after a loss, visited hospital rooms after injuries, and spoken with individuals and families carrying the invisible weight of this work. These moments have shaped not just the mission of the Wildland Fighter Foundation – they've shaped me."

According to Brocksome, Minor reacts "quickly and humbly" when there are injuries or death. Help includes buying groceries, taking care of daily needs, or making housing payments if necessary.

"Our job is to support the families and fill the gaps that agencies are not able to fill," Brocksome said.

The wildland firefighting community is reeling after a tragic ambush in Coeur d'Alene on June 29, where two firefighters were killed in the line of duty and a third was gravely injured. The attack, which occurred during a routine response, has sent shockwaves through fire crews across the region and beyond. The Wildland Firefighter Foundation stepped in to offer support. Minor personally contacted the appropriate agencies as soon as news broke and has remained in communication with those on the ground.

The Wildland Firefighter Foundation will honor the two firefighters at its Boise headquarters when the time is appropriate. This recognition is a solemn tradition for the foundation, which has long served as a source of comfort and solidarity for the wildland

fire service. The wildland foundation goes beyond Idaho's borders. The foundation's reach has gone to places such as Canada and Australia – wherever a tragedy occurs.

“When a wildland firefighter is lost, and the foundation is contacted for assistance, the weight of that support, is carried almost exclusively by our executive director,” Brocksome says. “He’s attended more funerals than anyone would ever want in a lifetime.”

Two years ago, the foundation added a wellness program to the mix. Brocksome, who has 15 years of experience in mental health and personal development, was hired for the position. Wildland fighters are a unique breed. Brocksome says there are roughly 30,000 men and women wildland fighters of the nation's 1.3 million firefighters.

“It’s an interesting personality type that is willing to work six to eight months straight, on 14-day rolls, and only two or three days for a break,” Brocksome says. “They eat together and sleep in the dirt, basically next to each other. There’s chronic stress and the nutrition is suspect – sometimes when they are on the road, it amounts to a hotdog at a gas station. The jokes get old, and the nerves get frayed. They are sacrificing barbecues, holidays, kids’ birthdays and all the stuff we take for granted, as part of our existence.”

Firefighters thrive on the adrenalin rush that comes with battling blazes, but there is a downside away from the action. Suicide and divorce rates are high. Alcohol and substance abuse are common problems in the wildland community.

“Mental health is a big concern for the firefighters,” Brocksome says.

And where would we be without them? These are men and women who put their lives on the line to fight the most vicious of natural disasters. These warriors are true American heroes.

More recently under Burk Minor's direction and for almost 30 years, the Wildland Firefighter Foundation has been on the front lines to ensure that these heroes are well served.

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